

MEMORANDUM

15 Rev (7-55)

TO Daniel Ellsberg

DATE 8-20-63

FROM Bernard Brodie

MEMO NO M-6070

SUBJECT COMMENTS ON YOUR COMMENTS ON HORELICK'S DRAFT, RM-3779-PR

COPIES TO F.R.Collbohm, E.Dews, H.Dinerstein, A.George, H.Goldhamer, J.Goldsen, A.Horelick, S.Hosmer, N.Leites, A.Marshall, J.Schlesinger, R.Wohlstetter

In general I like your comments very much; they reflect your customary incisiveness and your customary but uncommon willingness to make your criticisms suitably known.

I have, however, a reservation. I think I should have felt impelled to make it in any case, but I am helped along by the fact that you used my name in connection with the very point I wish to question. Near the bottom of page 7 you have the following statement:

"Second, there is a point on which conversation with Brodie has focused my attention (though it runs contrary to his public position on this specific matter): that it might be foolish to rely absolutely upon doctrine, traditional behavior patterns, and rational calculation to restrain the Soviets from an ill-considered and highly risky violent action in response to the emotions likely to be aroused in the actual event of a humiliating defeat, and the shedding of Soviet blood in Cuba."

The statement you are making does not run contrary to my public position on this matter -- or else I am much mistaken about what I have said or written. How could it, when I am obliged to regard your statement as truistic, especially since you used and underlined so unqualified a term as "absolutely".

In two or three other places in your memo you stress the relevance of conceivable contingencies, appearing to argue that just because they are conceivable some kind of accounting must be made for them in one's decisions. For example, two sentences preceding the one I have quoted you state the following:

"Events in Cuba, even events unfavorable in themselves to the Soviets, could seem significantly to lower the risks to the Soviets of certain kinds of moves elsewhere, compared to the risks of such action prior to the crisis."

One must of course avoid being more positive or dogmatic than the available evidence warrants. Interpretations of other people's behavior, especially people as remote from us physically as the Soviet leaders, is always fallible. But from the point of view of the decision-maker, who during a crisis may have to choose between some very different courses of action, it is really quite important that one interpretation is, in the light of all the data known to us, overwhelmingly more probable than others. So far as the situation permits, he should make allowances for the possibility that his favored interpretation is wrong, but this attitude can in real life situations mean indecisive straddling and a fatal weakening of one's moves. Anyway, the penalty for making the wrong guess is not likely to be an utterly reckless move by the opponent.

s.e. it is his belief as to what is "most probable" that is wrong?
What we usually criticize among great historical blunders is not so much the forthrightness of the position taken as the deficiencies in the logic and/or the degree of willful ignorance that accounted for its being a wrong position. For example, only the other night I happened to read again Haig's notorious statement just before the battle of the Somme that the machine gun was "much overrated." Now what do we blame more, his not making allowance for the possibility that he might be wrong, or his continuing as late as the summer of 1916 to believe such fatuous and costly nonsense? Obviously the latter, and with good reason. Where had he been in the previous two years?

What I am saying is, of course, utterly banal, but not, alas, superfluous. I have been much struck of late with the degree to which some of our brightest people, in RAND and out, are ready to let great policy decisions be governed by imagined contingencies which they find conceivable, without bothering to ask how probable they are -- as though the mere fact of their being conceivable gave them also a respectable degree of probability. I had thought that we in RAND stood for the greatest possible quantification of our concepts, but we fall down badly when we begin to talk about what the enemy might do. Surely it is required of us social scientists that we discriminate sharply among imaginable contingencies in terms of their relative degree of likelihood. Our judgments about specific probabilities may be wrong, but we cannot abandon the obligation to make such judgments as best we can. Otherwise some kinds of conceivable events will have a fascination utterly disproportionate to their likelihood, probably because they make the case interesting and maybe exciting. It may be necessary to

let our imaginations range over contingencies like the "Hamburg grab", or like the French committing national suicide by using their force de frappe to trigger a general nuclear war that we might be trying to avoid; but to stop short of asking how likely these events really are is simply irresponsible.

One quite different point: On your page 5 you suggest that if the Russians were to impose a land blockade of access to Berlin, "it would be the U.S. and its allies who would have to use force to penetrate...." My main concern is not whether that argument is literally true or not, but rather how relevant it is in view of the fact that the statement is somewhat questionable. If in order to discover whether it is true one has to go into very minute detail about the scenario, approaching gingerly the question of who has to fire the first shot, the question may be too finicky to be important. After all, we are moving troops in and out of Berlin along the autobahns all the time. The situation is therefore not at all like sending a hostile force across a forbidden national frontier. Why should we not, in the event of need, equip those troops to repair bridges and to remove interposed obstacles? Would it not be up to the Russians to stop them, perhaps firing the first shot in doing so? To repeat, it is not as important in such an instance to decide who would have to fire the first shot as to consider whether the question is important enough to be permitted to paralyze policy as much as it has in the past.

Forgive the intrusion and the banalities.

Bernard
Bernard Brodie

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